

Coronavirus presents a crisis for Africa. We have a duty to help.



South African community activists patrol with the help of police in Johannesburg on Monday. (Jerome Delay/AP)



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The first line of history’s judgment on the Trump administration has already been written: For 70 days the president slept as the novel coronavirus spread.

President Trump’s coronavirus response became a spectacular failure of competence. But it began as a failure of imagination. As the evidence of a dangerous virus mounted, Trump could not conceive of a problem immune to his peculiar brand of “leadership.”

Denial — “[We have it totally under control](#)” — was the growth medium in which the virus multiplied. Trump’s mixed messaging led some of his strongest supporters into the risky defiance of public health orders. Even with access to the best medical advisers on the planet, Trump’s penchant for conspiracy thinking caused him to honor the medical judgments of Rudolph W. Giuliani and [Peter Navarro](#). Trump’s blind nepotism led him to rely in the completely undemonstrated management skills [of Jared Kushner](#).

We rightly judge Trump’s reaction to this gathering crisis as a fiasco. But what if, at the same time, the outlines of another, entirely foreseeable human disaster were emerging? And what if we had the information — all of us — that makes us responsible for denial and indifference?

It does not take much imagination to consider the likely course of the coronavirus in Africa. For a variety of reasons (some not fully understood), the virus has gotten a slow start on the continent. Many African nations [cut off travel from Asia early](#) and are not well integrated into global travel routes in the first place. Some countries have been effectively applying the contact tracing techniques they learned [in the context of other outbreaks](#). The higher temperatures of Africa’s summer (which is opposite our own) may have had some inhibiting influence on the disease’s spread. And with a median age under 20 years old, Africa may be less vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus, at least when compared to countries such as Italy (with a median age of 45 years old).

But African countries are flying blind in the absence of testing. And there is little doubt that most of Africa now stands on the edge of a precipice. For many places [I have visited](#) — from vast urban slums to refugee and displaced-persons camps — social distancing is a cruel joke. Many people make their living in crowded markets and live in crowded housing. Clean water for proper hygiene can be scarce. These are conditions in which the rapid transmission of communicable diseases is not only possible but common.

The situation in Africa is further complicated by a variety of underlying health issues — including HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, measles, cholera and malnutrition — that may make covid-19 more difficult to treat. And even moderate levels of coronavirus infection would overwhelm fragile African health systems. Liberia — with a population as large as Louisiana — [has three ventilators](#) at its disposal. A study from a few years ago found that Kenya — with 50 million people — had [130 intensive care beds](#).

By [some estimates](#), African countries will need to devote more than \$100 billion in additional health spending to fight the coronavirus. But falling oil and commodity prices, crashing tourism revenue and lower trade and direct foreign investment have made African economies particularly vulnerable to the coming shock. And because that shock is global in scope, traditional donor countries will be occupied with their own economic problems.

A strategically and morally grounded American president might identify this predictable disaster early, while preventive action would be helpful. While aggressively confronting the American crisis, he or she might create a global, emergency health financing mechanism to help developing countries meet their most urgent needs. Such a president might cajole European countries and

Japan into sharing the political risks and budgetary burdens for taking a moral action of great humanity and foresight. Such a president might even invite China into such an effort.

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We don't have such a president. Trump lacks the ideological tools and personal empathy to originate such a proposal. But Republican and Democratic members of Congress should see this as an opportunity in the great tradition of the [Marshall Plan](#) and the [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief](#). And American citizens should support spending a small portion of our massive coronavirus response on the world's poorest. Our distinctive form of nationalism is defined, in part, by a respect for universal human dignity. And this is a chance to demonstrate our national character in a crucible moment.

Whatever our response, we have no excuse. We know what is coming.